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South Korea as a Global Actor: International Contributions to Development and Security

Philipp Olbrich and David Shim

South Korea recently hosted two major international events: the High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness in December 2011 and the Nuclear Security Summit in March 2012. Both meetings underscore South Korea's ambitions to increase its involvement in global development assistance and security.

Analysis

The Korean president Lee Myung-bak is pursuing a policy of international contributions with his "Global Korea" national security strategy. Foreign deployments of the South Korean military and an increase in development assistance are expressions of this policy. However, not only humanitarian reasons, but also the desire for global visibility, recognition and influence play a role in this context.

- South Korea joined the OECD's Development Assistance Committee at the end of 2009; ten years previously this committee had still classified the country as a recipient state.
- When deploying its military to foreign countries, South Korea's priorities are non-military assignments such as civil reconstruction, political consulting or medical support.
- The activities in the field of development assistance and security constitute core elements in the expansion of the country's role in international relations.
- Considering South Korea's economic and political development since the state's inception in 1945, its further ascent in global politics cannot be ruled out.

Keywords: South Korea, development assistance, foreign military deployments, diplomacy

South Korea's Global Ambitions

The fourth High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness took place in the South Korean harbor city Busan from 29 November to 1 December 2011. Over 2,000 government, civil society and business representatives from industrial as well as developing countries convened at the meeting to discuss the current global development assistance situation. This was the second major international event under Lee Myung-bak's government since the G20 summit. The aspiration to exert influence on global processes and the desire for visibility were additionally advanced by means of the Nuclear Security Summit in March 2012. The wish for influence and recognition is formulated in the "Global Korea" national security strategy. Not only does this document outline the risks and challenges to national security, but it also provides a concept for a foreign policy which envisions the expansion of South Korea's international role. In addition to the maximization of national interests and other aspects, the significance of international reputation is stipulated as a power factor (Cheong Wa Dae 2009). This context is the background for South Korea's global ambitions in development and security.

South Korea – From Recipient to Provider of Development Assistance

At the end of the Korean War in 1953, the peninsula's economy was shattered. Under Park Chung-hee's military dictatorship – and with assistance from the United States and others – the country recovered rapidly. The economy flourished and massive corporations were founded due to large-scale investments in export-relevant industries in conjunction with protectionism for the domestic market. Even though South Korea was classified as a recipient of development assistance until the 1990s, the country had already acted as a provider of assistance as early as 1987; however, its expenditures for development assistance at this time amounted to merely 24 million USD. Since then the South Korean budget has continually increased, reaching almost

700 million USD under President Roh Moo-hyun in 2007 (OECD 2011a). Nevertheless, this substantial amount did not automatically give rise to a more active participation in international development assistance endeavors. Therefore, the intention of President Lee Myung-bak's "Global Korea" strategy is to promote South Korea's development assistance activities, in the course of which a budget increase is planned and the efficiency of assistance is to be placed on the agenda.

In late 2009 South Korea was accepted into the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), and thus joined the company of established industrial nations such as the USA, Germany and Japan. This was the first time that a former recipient country had joined the prestigious circle of provider nations. At the DAC, which provides 90 percent of global development assistance funding, the provider nations coordinate their approaches to development assistance in order to enhance the efficiency of their development policies. Korean expenditures for official development assistance (ODA) have increased by 65 percent, from approximately 700 million USD to 1.2 billion USD, since Lee Myung-bak's inauguration in 2008. Additionally, South Korea provides substantial funding for humanitarian help for North Korea. This is not officially categorized as ODA.¹ According to South Korea's constitution, the entire Korean peninsula constitutes state territory. Thus, the government in Seoul views this matter as a purely Korean issue.

South Korea's entire ODA of approximately 1.2 billion USD constitutes 0.12 percent of the country's gross national income. The DAC average of 0.32 percent is higher, but clearly fails to reach its self-proclaimed target of 0.7 percent (OECD 2011a). The overall balance within the committee is very uneven: while Sweden allocates approximately 0.97 percent of its gross national income for development assistance, Germany only allocates 0.38 percent and Italy merely 0.15 percent. South

¹ From 1991 to 2009 the so-called Inter-Korean Cooperation Fund financed projects with a total value of 7.7 billion USD (Kim 2010). However, since Lee's inauguration its expenditures have been substantially reduced.

Korea aims to reach 0.15 percent by 2012 and intends to increase this figure by 0.25 percent after a period of three years, a goal which is achievable considering the increase so far and in the event of a favourable economic forecast. However, in absolute figures, South Korea is at a comparatively low level. While Italy's percentage is similar to South Korea's, its expenditure of 3.1 billion USD for development assistance is two and a half times as high as South Korea's.

A further increase can be expected in 2012. South Korea has committed to adapting its international commitment to its growing economic possibilities, pointing to its own experiences as a recipient nation of development assistance and the country's rapid economic recovery. At the same time, the government expects that the increase of foreign assistance will yield some returns; for example, a preference for South Korean corporations when contracts are being awarded, or privileged access to the natural resources of recipient countries (Cheong Wa Dae 2009). An examination of ODA allocation and several partnership agreements make this approach apparent.

The regional allocation of funds is a decisive aspect of development assistance. Thirty percent of DAC development assistance funds are allocated to the sub-Saharan region as this is where the majority of less developed countries are located. However, South Korea spends only 13 percent of its development budget here, preferring to make concentrated expenditures of more than 50 percent in the Asian region (OECD 2011a). From a geostrategic perspective this concentration makes sense, as the Asian continent is increasingly gaining influence in global politics (cf. Clinton 2011; The White House 2012). Within Asia the focus is on Vietnam, Mongolia and Indonesia. These countries receive approximately 20 percent of the development assistance funding. These are not severely underdeveloped countries, but countries with lucrative sales markets and substantial resources. Whereas Mongolia is among the ten countries with the world's largest reserves of mineral resources (AA 2011), Vietnam and Indonesia, respectively, produce 300,000 and 1 million barrels of crude

oil daily. Angola is another example of this policy. With 5 percent, Angola is the African country that receives by far the largest amount of South Korean development assistance. The country also produces 2 million barrels of oil per day (EIA 2011).²

The regional allocation of development assistance illustrates that the recipient country's economic potential as well as its resources are decisive factors in the granting of aid. This reciprocal policy is implemented although the DAC's definition of public development assistance emphasizes that the promotion of the recipient countries' economies and welfare must constitute the main objectives of any official development assistance (IMF 2003). While the objective of development assistance thus follows national interests, the regional concentration is also a result of the reform of South Korea's ODA. Following an OECD recommendation, the previously extensive list of recipients has been shortened. As a consequence, 26 recipient countries have been named as the recipients of 70 percent of the direct funds.

The concentration of development assistance on fewer recipients is in compliance with the aims of the 2005 Paris Declaration, which were agreed upon by leading industrial nations in order to increase the efficiency of their assistance. Further guidelines were decreed at the fourth High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness in Busan in late 2011: private organizations and aspiring industrial nations are to be included in addition to the traditional provider nations for the purpose of strengthening so-called South-South cooperation. At this meeting a global partnership for the effective implementation of development assistance was initiated with the aim of extending transparency, accountability and verifiability.³ Furthermore, aspiring countries such as Brazil, India and China were also signatories to the final Busan document. However, these three countries were able to ensure that the decreed procedures and rules are voluntary for them (OECD 2011b). This

² Thus, Angola is among the 12 leading oil producers worldwide.

³ The details and schedules for the new partnership have been postponed until negotiations in June 2012.

lack of obligation means that the impediments to stricter controls and increased transparency for the steadily increasing allocation of development assistance by emerging countries remain. For example, the Chinese government has been accused of undermining customary assistance practices and exclusively pursuing own interests. In contrast, South Korea will be judged on the results of the summit, which require stronger efforts than a mere increase in ODA expenditures.

In addition to the regional concentration, the large discrepancy between bilateral and multilateral assistance can be explained against the background of South Korea's global ambitions. Multilateral aid has the advantage of economy-of-scale effects. These effects occur when many countries pay their aid funds into a single account, which is then under the central management of organizations such as the World Bank and put to use according to specific development policies. The expertise of an organization that can distribute the funds as efficiently as possible is utilized. When the ODA is distributed by one single international organization, the visibility of the individual provider nation is reduced. As this contradicts the aims of the "Global Korea" strategy, it comes as no surprise that only 24 percent of Korea's ODA is distributed multilaterally. The aim of increasing the budget for disaster relief to 6 percent of the entire development assistance is governed by a similar motivation. In addition to the humanitarian value, prompt and extensive assistance also increases the provider country's visibility.

Foreign Deployments of the South Korean Military

The fact that issues of international security are increasingly acknowledged in South Korea's foreign policy is an indication of the country's global ambitions. An example is the Nuclear Security Summit in March 2012, where over 50 heads of state and international organizations gathered in Seoul to discuss urgent issues regarding global nonproliferation such as measures against the proliferation of

nuclear weapons of mass destruction and the prevention of the illegal trading of the nuclear material.

The foreign deployment of the South Korean military is another example of the country's global ambitions. The particular interest in international security and economic stability is not surprising as South Korea's economy is largely based on its global exports. During the 1950s a United Nations (UN) mission took place on the Korean peninsula, and the country has been participating in UN peacekeeping missions since 1993. Between 2003 and 2008 South Korea deployed the third-largest contingent, after the USA and Great Britain, of the multinational troops participating in the Iraqi Freedom operation. Until the expiration of the UN mandate for the mission in Iraq in late 2008, South Korean engineers and medical staff contributed to civil reconstruction in Iraq. The rebuilding of destroyed regions and the provision of humanitarian help are central elements of the missions when South Korea deploys its military abroad. These aspects are also the priority in missions that are not peacekeeping operations under direct UN mandate — for example, the mission in Afghanistan. They promote the diplomatic components of South Korean foreign military deployments. In addition to the humanitarian aspect, emphasising South Korea's global responsibility serves the purpose of increasing the country's repute.

Having experienced the Korean War (which ended in 1953), South Korea participates in UN peacekeeping measures and other multilateral missions. Approximately 300,000 soldiers fought together with the United States in the Vietnam War. In the early 1990s South Korea was part of the coalition that ended the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait. Since its admission to the UN in 1991, South Korea has been contributing soldiers for peacekeeping operations. Despite recurring tensions in relations with North Korea, President Lee Myung-bak's predecessors sent parts of the military on foreign missions. Whereas the predecessors were more strongly influenced by the so-called "payback-syndrome," according to which South Korea was indebted to the international community due to the support

received in the Korean War (Sesay 2002: 203), Korea's own interests have increasingly become the focus of foreign deployments under Lee.

Currently, 743 South Koreans are participating in nine peacekeeping operations. The UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), with 480 soldiers, and the United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH), with a contingent of 240 troops, constitute the two largest operations. The remaining missions involve single South Korean officers, police officers or experts with predominantly consultant or supervisory functions. When selecting the respective mission for South Korean participation, a focus is placed on nonmilitary activities. In addition to the supervision of the border region in South Lebanon, the South Korean military is also involved in the reconstruction of the country. This includes medical assistance, computer training, and lessons in the Korean writing system and Taekwondo, as well as the provision of support for local educational facilities. Furthermore, public relations work is conducted or exchanges and collaborations with military units from foreign countries are promoted as elements of military diplomacy (MND 2010). The focus of the Haiti mission is on medical support for the population and reconstruction; the same applies to the regional reconstruction team operating under ISAF command in Afghanistan. The operation off the coast of Somalia constitutes an exception to the usual practice of humanitarian mission objectives. In the context of the multinational operation Enduring Freedom at the Horn of Africa, South Korea has deployed a destroyer to guarantee safe passage for merchant ships and to conduct anti-piracy missions.

The South Korean government has at its disposal a 3,000-strong standby force for foreign missions, a third of which is in a permanent state of immediate deployability. At the end of 2009 the South Korean parliament passed a law with a relatively cautious definition of peacekeeping operations with regard to its participation in UN peace missions. It only covers missions which, for example, contribute to the supervision of ceasefires, to the staging of elections, and to reconstruction or humanitarian

help, and which have been mandated by the UN. The law does not provide for participation in the independent missions of NATO, the EU or other multilateral organizations.

In contrast to poorer countries, the compensatory payments provided by the UN to deployed soldiers are of marginal relevance to South Korea. Rather, national interests are of predominant importance; for example, in Somalia, where the objective is the immediate protection of an important trade route. However, the operational area for South Korean troops covers a region so extensive that only collaboration among several nations can make success likely. By deploying a destroyer, South Korea is involved in these international efforts. Collaboration is also stipulated as an objective for other foreign missions. Participation in peacekeeping operations constitutes an effective means of making concrete contributions to international security and increasing global visibility. As a consequence, South Korea is making efforts to increase the extent of its participation in multinational foreign missions, provided that they are supported by the international community. Additionally, the division of tasks in foreign missions and in development assistance in general generates many opportunities for collaboration with other countries.

South Korea's Quest for International Status

South Korea's historical background provides the motives for its extension of its international commitments. The government cites South Korea's moral obligation and responsibility as a former developing country and site of a UN mission, and emphasizes international solidarity as a logically coherent consequence of increasing interdependency. However, at the same time, its activities in development assistance and security are identified as core elements for the extension of the country's role in international relations (Cheong Wa Dae 2009). The "Global Korea" concept, which constitutes the globalization of Korea's interest-driven policies, defines international commitment in precisely these areas as the

features of an actor with global ambitions. Whereas the attempt to globalize Korea's foreign and security policies is not new – one example is the internationalization, *seggyehwa* policy, of former president Kim Young-sam (1993–1998) – greater importance is now vested in increasing the country's reputation and status at the global level. In addition to the traditional power factors such as the military and the economic strength of the state, reputation is now seen as a core factor in gaining influence, exerting power and solidifying claims to a leading international position.

It is this background in particular against which Korea's activities in the political fields of development and security should be assessed. Hence the "Global Korea" strategy declares: "Our contributions abroad and international peace-keeping activities should not be pursued merely as instruments of assistance. They should rather be approached from a comprehensive perspective of improving Korea's international standing and potential to serve overseas" (Cheon Wa Dae 2009: 27). Increasing the country's reputation does not constitute an end in itself but rather, from the perspective of the government in Seoul, contributes to cultivating international relations according to its own ideas. Active participation in solving global problems serves not only to improve South Korea's image, but also to exert influence on the international system (Cheong Wa Dae 2009: 13). From this, Korea derives its claim to a leading global role in the creation of the current world order. This claim is comparatively new in the country's foreign and security policy discourse.

The activities in the fields of development assistance and international security serve to build a reputation for trustworthiness and reliability. As long as there is no supranational system supervising and sanctioning the adherence to promises (for example, promises of assistance) or even legal norms (for example, the prohibition of violence), these two attributes are decisive factors for a state intending to implement its interests.

While these political areas are an expression of an increased claim to self-assertion, there are further areas that also receive strategic attention: the exertion of influence on the in-

ternational economic order through various institutions such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and the G20 process, as well as on global climate and environment policies by means of economic initiatives promoting sustainability, such as the Korean government's "green" Low Carbon Green Growth model (Shim 2010). Furthermore, other actors are also demanding policies with a stronger global perspective. Thus, the USA no longer views the central foundation of Korea's security policy, the military alliance between Seoul and Washington, as a regional security alliance, but rather as a global alliance to jointly master the challenges of international politics – for example, in the areas of security (for instance, terrorism) and development (for instance, emergency assistance). The UN Secretary General, Ban Ki-moon, has asked his country to play a larger role in international matters and has, for example, asked for the deployment of peacekeeping troops to the newly founded state of South Sudan.

While South Korea has seen an increase in its significance in international politics, it is also clear that the country is in the early stages of its ambitions of being a global actor. However, considering the state's achievements – industrialization, modernization and democratization – since its inception in 1945, a further ascent cannot be ruled out.

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■ Related GIGA Research

GIGA is currently conducting a research project, directed by Patrick Köllner, on South Korea's role in international politics. The Korea Foundation-funded project is allocated to GIGA Research Programme 4 "Power, Norms and Governance in International Relations," and examines the trajectories and fields of activity of current South Korean foreign and security policy.

■ Related GIGA Publications

Flamm, Patrick, and Patrick Köllner (2011), *KORUS, KOREU und darüber hinaus: Südkoreas Freihandelspolitik in freier Fahrt*, GIGA Focus Asien, 12, online: <www.giga-hamburg.de/giga-focus/asien>.

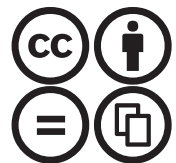
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